

FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Development since the creation of man has been the desire of mankind and every nation. To achieve this, many strategies and policies have been set on motion to actualize it. The quest for this gave birth to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the United Nations which was later replaced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve this, many measures have been established including local governments. Despite local government reforms and many strategies to assist local governments in achieving SDGs in Nigeria, many challenges have been frustrating the effort. This necessitated the need to identify these challenges. The efficiency-services theory was used as the theoretical framework for the work and factors like poor financial base, limited autonomy, unsteady administrative structure, unqualified staff, corruption, etc. were identified as factors militating against local government in achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria. Possible recommendations like giving financial autonomy to local governments, employment of staff based on meritocracy, specifying the roles of local government, proper accountability and transparency, appointment of leaders based on merit, etc. were also given. The application of these recommendations will help reposition and empower local government towards achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria before 2030 deadline.

Keywords: development, grass root development, local government, sustainable development and sustainable development goals.

Introduction

Since the evolution of man, one thing that man has been struggling for is to develop himself and his society in all ramifications. This has made development a key factor in any given society. Each society is trying to find ways to evolve and develop. The concept of development differs from one society to another.

Michael (2016) saw development as the systematic use of scientific and technical knowledge to meet specific objectives, needs or requirements of the people. Similarly, Katar (2010) is of the view that development is the process of economic and social transformation that is based on complex and environmental factors and their interaction. Ideally, development is the improvement in the capacity of the individual and society to manipulate the factors of nature as well as themselves for their own benefit and that of humanity.

Sustainable development goes beyond the simple development. It is the ability to develop or take care of the present needs without compromising the chances of the future generation in taking care of their needs. Sustainable development entails maintenance of a delicate balance between the human need to improve lifestyle and feeling of well-being on the one hand and preserving natural resources and ecosystems on the other hand so that the needs of the future generations are not put in jeopardy. It can be defined as a form of development that ensures meeting the aspirations or needs of the present and also ensuring that future generations are secured, by preserving those natural resources and the ecosystem needed for further development. It implies economic growth together with the protection of environmental quality, each reinforcing the other (Abiaro & Adefeso, 2014; Angela, 2017).

For sustainable development to take place in any society, it must pass through certain stages and the success of these stages are dependent on many factors which include: environment, interaction with other societies within and outside, leadership and its style, management, culture, individual and collective goal(s) of the people and the community and government at all levels; federal, state and local governments (Kolawole, Adeigbe&Kayode, 2014).

With regards to government, the effort of the local government is very critical or essential towards sustainable development. This is based on the fact that local government is viewed to be the closest government to the people and they understand the needs and peculiarities of their localities. In the view of Zakari (in Angela, 2017), local governments in Nigeria were primarily designed to identify and meet the basic needs and aspirations of the rural community. According to Agbeso (2017), some of the goals of SDG's are seen at the local levels and they also fall under the responsibilities of the local government as stated in the Nigerian constitution. To buttress this point, Ezeani (2015) pointed out that most goals of SGD's can be effectively achieved through actions at the local level. This shows that local government is a critical factor and pivotal to grassroot development and achievement of sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

Despite all efforts to improve the effectiveness of local government, some scholars like Bello-Imam and Roberts (2014), Adeyemi (2017), Chukwuemeka (2014) and Ibok (2014) are of the view that a critical and in-depth analysis shows that local governments have performed abysmally. They are of the view that despite the Local Government Reform Act of 1976 which changed the status of local government to third tier of government with some duties, obligations and rights assigned to it, it is still not performing as expected. Obasanjo (2016) pointed out that despite all funds and measures implemented to re-engineer and revamp local governments in Nigeria, it is still rendered impotent by some factors. Hence, this paper is geared towards identifying some of these factors and making possible recommendations which will assist in rebranding local governments and also in achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria via the activities of local governments before the deadline of 2030 as stipulated by the United Nations.

Concept of Grass root Development

Development was a post–World War II concept used to describe and explain economic and social change throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America and Southeastern Europe. Defining the word development precisely is more difficult because it is a value-laden term. Development has been viewed from many perspectives and has been defined in several ways. The definitions of development can be complex and often have a cultural basis and it involves education, health, democracy, human rights, income, well-being and sustainability (Echem, 2014).

Sociologists believe that development is about achieving economic growth and the positive consequences which have generally stemmed from that such as improvements in life expectancy, mass education and social welfare. They also believe that development should mean at the very least, improvement or progress for people who desperately need positive change in their lives. It is the improvement in the capacity of the individual and society to manipulate the forces of nature as well as themselves for their own benefit and that of humanity. Hence, the term development encompasses the need and the means by which to provide better lives for people in poor countries. It includes not only economic growth, although that is crucial but also human development-providing for health, nutrition, education and a clean environment, (Allan, 2000). This implies that development should be concerned with enhancing human rights and welfare and not just with improving people's income or wealth.

The concept of grass root development has been viewed from many perspectives and some scholars use such words as rural development and community development. However, they are all pointing to the same issue which is grass root development. Dorwart (2005) argues that the concept of

community or rural development is not new, but rather it is an old ideology. The reality in his assertion is that man in the society usually makes effort to sustain the communities throughout history by constructing and maintaining their roads, bridges, square, sunk their well for good drinking water supply, and constructing their markets, village churches and village halls.

The World Bank (2001) defined grass root development as a strategy designed to improve the economic and social conditions of a specific group of people (that is the local dwellers). It involves extending the benefit of development to the poorest among those seeking a livelihood in the local areas. According to Biggart and Guillen (1999), grass root development is broad based as it represents a set of policies or goals which are concerned with the enhancement of the well-being of the grass root populace where 75% of the entire population resides. According to Todaro (1981), grass root development is an advancement that makes life more meaningful in its entirety, whether political, economic, socio-cultural and infrastructural.

Generally speaking, the term grass root development refers to the act or process of enhancing and empowering the well-being of the vast majority of the rural dwellers through the provision of basic social and economic infrastructures. It is a development from below which some believe is a major force for national development. It is a community-based change through participatory self-help. The primary objective of development is to improve the quality of life for the poor and disadvantaged.

Lawal (2008) is of the view that many agents contribute to grass root development and they include age grade, town union, market men/women, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies, local government, state government, federal government, etc. From the government angle, Echem (2014) is of the opinion that local government is the most crucial to grass root development. This, according to him, is anchored on the fact that local government is closest to the people and they understand the culture, needs, aspirations, peculiarities and problems of the rural communities where they are found.

An Overview of Sustainable Development Goals

The concept of sustainable development is viewed mainly from two schools of thought: the ecologists' viewpoint and the economists' viewpoint. However how one looks at it, they all point to the idea of satisfying the present need without compromising the chances of the future generation in satisfying their own needs. According to Wikipedia (2018), sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs. It is the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while

simultaneously sustaining the ability of natural system to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services based upon which the economy and society depend on.

Sustainable development goals are a United Nations effort to create a common set of development goals for all communities in every country with the deadline for attainment of 2030 (Citiscopes.org, 2018). Sustainable development goals also known as the Global Goals were adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, at United Nations Sustainable Development Summit at New York, a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people will enjoy peace and prosperity (Kanu& Basil-Uchegbu, 2020). It came as a replacement to Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which came after the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

The sustainable development goals are set of seventeen goals which are (1) no poverty (2) zero hunger (3) good health and well-being (4) quality education (5) gender equity (6) clean water and sanitation (7) affordable and clean energy (8) decent work and economic growth (9) industry, innovation and infrastructure (10) reduced inequality (11) sustainable cities and communities (12) responsible consumption and production (13) climate change (14) life below water (15) life on land (16) peace, justice and strong institution, and (17) partnership for the goals.

The 17 goals of SDGs are integrated and the United Nations noted that action in one area will affect outcomes in others and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability. This made the United Nations to involve countries that are now committed to prioritize progress for those that are furthest behind. They acknowledged the fact that creativity, technical knowhow, technology and financial resources from all societies are necessary to achieve the SDGs in every context (Kanu et al, 2020).

The Declaration for SDGs asserted that every individual has dignity and hence, the right to freedom, equality and a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence and encourages tolerance and solidarity. The SDGs set concrete targets and indicators for poverty reduction in order to achieve the rights set forth in the Declaration. Just like the MDGs, the SDGs is also emphasizing on the role of developed countries in aiding developing countries, as outlined in goal seventeen (17), which sets objectives and targets for developed countries to achieve a global partnership for development by supporting fair trade, debt relief, increasing aid, access to affordable essential medicines and encouraging technology transfer. Thus developing nations (including Nigeria) ostensibly became partners with developed nations in the

struggle to achieve the SDGs before the year 2030 (Kanu et al, 2020; Angela, 2017).

It is in view of this that local government was identified as a vital tool in actualizing the sustainable development goals. This was why Oyebanji (2008, cited in Agbeso, 2017) pointed out that it is important to realize that even though the SDGs are global, they can most effectively be achieved through actions and interactions at the local level. He believes that most of the goals of the sustainable development goals are obtainable in the rural areas. For Agbeso (2017), goals number 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 affect the local areas a lot and can also be traced in the residual list of functions of local government as specified in the Constitution of Nigeria. Hence, local governments in Nigeria are essential in achieving grass root development and sustainable development goals in Nigeria.

Origin of Local Government in Nigeria

The concept of local government has been defined by many. The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the 1976 Local Government Reforms, defined local government as government at local level exercised through representative councils established by Law to exercise specific power within defined areas (Government Print: 1976 cited in Agbeso, 2017). In the same vein, The United Nations Office for Public Administration defined it as a political division of a nation (in a Federal or State system) which is constituted by Law and has substantial control of local affairs including the power to impose taxes (Agbeso, 2017).

The evolution of local government in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. Before the coming of the Europeans in Nigeria, there was nothing like Nigeria or Nigerian state. What existed then were relatively autonomous villages, towns and ethnic groups and each existed on its own with minimal contact with others, usually limited to trades and social transactions and little political relationship. Following the coming of the Europeans, noticeable changes took place in the political landscape of Nigeria (Ola, 2018). The colonial administration had to use the system of indirect rule. This requires that the administration should be carried out through traditional rulers and institutions. This led to the establishment of the native authorities in their most rudimentary forms and their main function was to maintain law and order within their jurisdiction.

After the Second World War in 1945, the British officials realized that local government could play an important role in development of Africa, especially in the area of community obligations, social responsibilities and political education. This made them to democratize the local government system as a bank for social, infrastructure and economic development. The objective of the local government was redefined as the engine for rural development. Hence,

various regional governments in Nigeria made various attempts to improve the means of attaining the new objectives (Ndukwe, 2005). Local government as corporate body was modernized in 1976 when local government was recognized as a third tier of government following the deliberate system reorganization by the administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo (Okpata, 2004). In 1999, a major landmark reform was introduced as local government system had legislative arm. The Babangida administration increased the number of local government areas from 301 which we had in 1976 local government reform to 453 in 1991 and 591 respectively. Abacha's regime also increased the number from 591 we had in 1991 to 774 local government councils in 1996 that exist today. Ever since then, local governments in Nigeria have been seen as agents of development in Nigeria (Ola, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Efficiency-Services Theory

According to Ezeani (2015) the proponents of this theory are Langood, Mackenzie and Sharpe and it came as a reaction to democracy-participatory theory. The crux of this theory is that the main purpose for the establishment of local government is to provide services to the local people. This theory justifies the existence of local government on the ground that it is an efficient agent for providing services that are local in character.

According to Mackenzie (1954 cited in Ezeani 2015), local government exists to provide service and it must be judged by its success in providing services up to a standard measured by a national inspectorate. It is argued that because of its closeness to the grassroots, local government can provide certain services far more efficiently than the central government (Ezeani, 2015). Indeed, Sharpe (1970 cited in Ezeani, 2015) was of the view that the efficient performance of these services is so compelling that if local government did not exist, something else would have to be created in its place.

In application of this theory to the work, local governments are established to provide social services for the people. They are closer to the grass root more than other tiers of government and their efforts are invaluable to grass root development including the achievement of the sustainable development goals. The effectiveness of local government can only be assessed based on the social services it provides to its local masses which are the reasons behind the establishment of local governments in Nigeria. Hence, efficient-service theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework for this work.

Factors Militating Against Local Government in Nigeria

Many challenges have been identified as factors militating against local governments in Nigeria. They include (but are not limited to):

Poor Financial Base/Limited autonomy

Ola (2018) opined that one of the major challenges confronting local governments in Nigeria is the issue of poor financial base. For him, local governments in Nigeria do not have financial autonomy. They depend mostly on the federal and state allocation for any financial assistance for them to run the system. He observed that federal and state government usually withhold local government fund for political or selfish reasons. This, he noted, frustrates the local governments in embarking on some meaningful projects that will lead to any meaningful development. This scenario is exacerbated by the inability of local governments to generate funds internally as opined by Adeyemi (2017). For him, local governments are handicapped most often because their functions are usually usurped or eroded especially by state governments and top politicians or officials. Money is required for the execution of any meaningful developmental project and when the local governments are unable to raise or receive adequate fund for these projects, the aim for their establishment will be defeated. This usually hinders local government from contributing towards sustainable development in such local government. Ugwuja (2014) is of the view that the influence of organized special interest groups has been a problem to the local government through diverse channels. This view was supported by Ebohand Diejomah (2018) when they observed that there is a high degree of external influence and interference in local government affairs by higher levels of government (particularly the state government) and top politicians/officials. This issue, according to them, is detrimental to the role of local government in achieving sustainable development.

Unsteady Administrative Structure

On the issue of administration, Ugwuja (2014) believed that the vital issue in the organization of local government is the structure of the local government system of administration and the physical area as well as the population of the unit. He noted regrettably that the local circumstances of each state including its historical and administrative legacies are not always considered by many local government administrators before reaching most sensitive decisions. He also pointed out that the structure of local governments in Nigeria always undergoes frequent reorganization in the hands of different government regimes.

Unqualified Staff

Adeyemi (2017) also posits that most staff in local governments are usually employed through favouritism. This hinders the employment of qualified and able staff that can pioneer the system towards achieving the goals of local government. For him, when an organization is saddled with staffs who are pseudo, it will affect them in all ramifications. For any organization to move forward and be productive and efficient, it needs not only material resources,

but also competent human resources who will carry out the assignments judiciously. If not, the organization will not be productive but moribund.

Use of Non-Professionals in Executing Task

Another major problem that militates against the performance local government is the issue of using non-professionals in executing task. Chukwuemeka (2014) argued based on the research he conducted that most jobs are always given to non-experts in the field for execution. He argued that due to the greed for amassing more wealth, most government officials tend to use non-experts who will charge them little and execute a project for them instead of professionals who will do a better job. He opined that most works are always executed unprofessionally and as a result, many of the projects do not stand the test of time. Examples are in the construction of roads within the local government, building of health care centres, markets, schools, etc. little wonder that Angela (2017) lamented on the state of infrastructures within most local governments that are on the verge of collapse despite that it has not been long the projects were commissioned by the government. Situations like this are always inimical or detrimental to the achievement of sustainable development by the local government.

Corruption

Another major problem militating against local government is the issue of corruption. Chukwuemeka (2014) argued that corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten into the fabrics of Nigeria as a nation. Virtually everybody in Nigeria is a party to corruption in one way or the other. From those occupying government offices to those on the streets doing business are guilty of corruption in one way or the other. This, he noted, includes officials and workers in the local government.

To buttress this point, Ola (2018) noted that before projects are awarded in most local governments, the benefactor of the contract must grease the palms of those in the office with certain percentage of the contract money. After collecting, the contract, the contractor will do a shabby work and the government will not evaluate nor monitor the contract to make sure that it is up to standard that will last the test of time. As a result of this, the needs of the present will not be met and the chances of the future generation meeting their needs will be jeopardized. Ola (2018) also noted that his research proved that many serving government officials (emphasis on local government councils) are only interested in what they will gain from any government program/business/activities that comes their way instead of making sure that jobs are executed expertly. This, he pointed, affects the performance and effectiveness of local governments thereby militating against the aims for establishing local government and also achieving sustainable development.

Other Problems

Other problems militating against local government effectiveness and efficiency, according to Adeyemi (2017); Agba, Akwara and Idu(2013) and Chukwuemeka (2014) are: Lack of basic social amenities such as power supply (electricity), transport and telecommunication facilities; misappropriation of funds; lack of accountability and transparency; lack of local plans and weak programming capacity; Instability arising from interferences from the higher tiers of government, who distort their (local government) powers, structure, leadership, finances. From their point of view, all these problems reduce the capacity of local government to act on their own, thereby making them solely dependent; nepotism and favoritism. They all believed that these problems act as a clog in the wheel of progress for local governments thereby hindering or limiting them from performing optimally. When the local government is saddled with these problems, it will be practically impossible for them to actualize their mandate. Hence, the problem of inability to actualize sustainable development becomes the other of the day.

Conclusion

Local governments were established constitutionally in Nigeria bearing in mind that they are vital to grass root development and sustainable development in Nigeria. This assertion has been upheld by the United Nations when they identified local government as key player to achievement of sustainable development goals. The case of Nigerian local governments is a different scenario. They have been saddled with challenges that have ravished many local governments in Nigeria and are now rendering it ineffective and sometimes impotent. The question now is: What is the way forward?

Recommendation

To ameliorate these challenges, the following recommendations are made.

- There is need for the local governments to be financially autonomous. If they are financially free from the apron strings of federal and state government financially, it will go a long way in helping them raise the required finance needed for the execution of meaningful projects which will be instrumental to actualization of sustainable development in Nigeria.
- The roles of local government should be specified with clear demarcation from state and federal government roles. There is need for the roles in executive list, residual list and concurrent list to be separated not only in theory but in practice. Local governments should be given financial and power autonomy to enable them take proper actions and execute projects that will help them in achieving sustainable development goals.
- The antecedents and structure of each local government should be considered before any policy is made. Each regime should, as a matter

of importance, maintain the structure of each local government. If there is need for any change in the structure, due protocol should be followed.

- Employment of staff should be based on meritocracy and not favouritism. This will give room for competent staff who are qualified and who will be effective and efficient to be employed.
- Government and stakeholders should make sure that any project initiated by the local, state or federal government should employ the services of experts in executing each project. They should also make sure that projects are properly supervised.
- All hands must be on deck to ensure that corruption is checkmated. There should be proper accountability and transparency by all and sundry. Those found guilty for corruption should be properly punished without any iota of favouritism. This will deter those intending to do such things in the future.
- There is need for proper accountability and transparency from government officials and those people handling any project. Anyone found guilty should be made to face the real weight of the law without compromise.
- Every program initiated should be properly planned and relevant stakeholders should be consulted and carried along before any program is executed. This will enable local governments to perform optimally.
- Before anyone is appointed a leader, such person must be scrutinized to make sure he/she is qualified for such post. It should not be based on party line and allegiance neither should it base on favouritism and mediocrity.

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